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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000559

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

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TAGS: PTER PGOV PREL VE CO

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ DEFENDS TERRORISM RECORD BUT WON'T STOP FARC

CARACAS 00000559 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco Fernandez,
Reasons 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a May 1 rally, President Hugo Chavez harshly criticized the Venezuela section of the USG April 30 Country Reports on Terrorism, calling it "a new aggression by the American empire." During the May 3 broadcast of his regular Sunday political talk show, "Alo Presidente," Chavez announced the fatal crash of an Army helicopter in the border state of Tachira and complained "eighteen dead and the USG accuses us of not patrolling our borders." Earlier in the week, Colombian President Uribe had publicly requested President Chavez's assistance in capturing FARC fighters that crossed into Venezuela after killing several Colombian soldiers. Chavez publicly responded, "It's not our war." The permeability of Venezuela's western border was illustrated that week when a suspected FARC regional commander and three ELN members were arrested in two Venezuelan border states. End Summary.

Chavez Disputes Terrorism Report

¶2. (SBU) President Hugo Chavez reacted testily to the Venezuelan section of the Country Reports on Terrorism. During a May 1 rally of pro-government unions, Chavez called the USG designation of Venezuela as not fully cooperating a "degradation." Chavez accused the United States "empire" of engaging in terrorism, and violence against the peoples of South America and the world for the last 100 years. "Leave us in peace," Chavez exhorted, vowing that Venezuela would never again be a "colony" of anyone.

¶3. (SBU) Chavez also cited the May 3 crash of a military helicopter that killed 18 near the Colombian border as evidence that Venezuela is patrolling its western border. (Note: This is the third Mi-17 HIP to crash in the last year and the third fatal helicopter crash for Venezuelan military aviation in the last 13 months. Among the dead was BGEN Domingo Fameitas. End Note). During the May 3 broadcast of his weekly talk show, "Alo Presidente," Chavez declared "Colombia's internal strife is fed by the war mongers of the United States, feeding conflicts to sell arms" adding, "it's not the Bush Administration, it's the Obama administration, but nothing has changed."

"Not Our War"

¶4. (SBU) Following a firefight in the Perija mountains

between Colombia and Venezuela that killed eight Colombian soldiers in which FARC members reportedly fled into Venezuela, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe publicly asked Chavez and the GBRV April 29 to "provide their full cooperation" to capture the criminals. In Cuba, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro assured on April 30 that irregular forces entering Venezuela from Colombia would be confronted by "all possible authorities from both the government and the Bolivarian armed forces." That same night in a nationally televised broadcast, Chavez countmanded his Foreign Minister stating, "this is not our war, it's Colombia's war and we are not getting involved." Recalling Colombia's attack on FARC leader Raul Reyes along Ecuador's border with Colombia, Chavez warned "we will not tolerate any armed incursions." Chavez also claimed to have told Obama that he is ready to work for peace in Colombia.

Venezuela's Permeable Western Border

¶ 15. (SBU) As if to underscore the easy transit of terrorists between Colombia and Venezuela, Zulia state police captured Jainer Esneider Acosta Pena, suspected second in command of FARC "Front 45" on April 22 in the frontier town of Machiques. Zulia state Commissioner of Security and Public Order refused to speculate on Acosta Pena's activities, only confirming that he was wanted in Colombia for the crimes of rebellion and terrorism. In the southern state of Barinas, the Guardia Nacional reportedly captured three persons on April 27 conducting an extortion campaign in the town of Socopo. The suspects were discovered to be members of the Eastern Block of the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) when they presented false Venezuelan identity cards.

CARACAS 00000559 002.2 OF 002

¶ 16. (C) Comment. The Venezuelan government routinely lashes out against U.S. government reports critical of the Chavez administration, so Chavez's most recent outbursts come as no surprise. Per GBRV custom, Chavez and other senior officials are trying to discredit the USG's authority to pass judgment rather than addressing the substance of the Department's Terrorism Report. Chavez, regrettably, is also suggesting that improving diplomatic relations depends on the U.S. refraining from any criticism of the GBRV. End Comment.

CAULFIELD